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Q&A on Co-Teaching with CEC President Marilyn Friend: Part II

By [Christina Samuels](#) on March 1, 2011 8:40 AM

The second part of our blog Q&A with CEC president [Marilyn Friend](#) on the topic of collaboration and co-teaching continues below. You can find the first part of the Q&A [here](#).

Should a co-taught classroom look different from a classroom with a solo teacher? Or is it better that observers not be able to recognize who might be the subject-area specialist, and who is the special educator?

In a classroom for young children, strong co-teachers often are indistinguishable in terms of role. Both work with all students, and they can increase instructional intensity by implementing many strategies for all students while embedding more specialized instruction for students with disabilities. Grouping and re-grouping of students is common and differentiated work often is the norm, and so the blending of teachers can easily take place.

The same may not be true in secondary classrooms. This occurs in part because of the teachers' different types of expertise and in part because of the typical structure of secondary classrooms. In middle and high school, the content expertise of the general educator and the learning process expertise of the special educator often are more apparent in the classroom. Many general education secondary teachers receive far too little instruction in their preservice preparation on working with students with disabilities, and so they rely on special educators for that information. Many special educators (but not all) co-teach in general education classroom in subject matter in which they do not have deep knowledge, and they rely on the general educator for this component of instruction.

As a result, it is more common in secondary classrooms to distinguish the teachers based on their expertise. In addition, if the secondary classroom has a large component of whole-group instruction, too often the general educator leads this activity and the special educator assists individual students or takes a supportive role, for example, modeling note-taking. While the latter is not inherently inappropriate, it usually signals which teacher has which type of expertise.

In model secondary co-taught classes, the goal is to have parity, that is, for all the expertise each teacher bring to be valued equally in the classroom. Students are grouped in many ways, content and process are blended, and students convey equivalent respect for each educator. This is a high expectation, but when reached, students clearly benefit.

What kind of preparation should be done at the preservice level to prepare general educators and special educators to work in a co-teaching model?

Many special educators now have preservice coursework in collaboration and co-teaching. Some even take an entire course in co-teaching. And in some preservice programs, special and general education programs are blended, at least in part, and so partnership is part of professional preparation.

However, in too many cases this type of preservice preparation is not occurring, especially for secondary education majors. What would fix this? Ideally, all teacher candidates would take at least one course together, and that course would focus on all the collaborative work that is now integral to successful 21st-century schools. It would have an emphasis on co-teaching, but it would also consider mentoring, coaching, induction, school-university partnerships, teacher leadership, and teaming. Shared projects and field experiences likewise would help to build an understanding of the importance of partnership across education. This would make teacher preparation more comparable to contemporary professional preparation in other fields, most of which have a strong emphasis on collaboration.

Of course, there is work to be done through professional development as well. In fact, because co-teaching is one of the field's top issues, it will be the subject of a day-long preconvention workshop at CEC's **2011 Convention & Expo**, a presentation that will address key questions that professionals often raise concerning co-planning, shared instruction, and other nuts-and bolts co-teaching issues.

How would you place co-teaching in the context of the broader reform initiatives that we're seeing now in education?

As president of the CEC, I have the opportunity to interact with many extraordinary leaders in the field who are diligently working to help shape the future of education. The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act is on the horizon, and the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act will follow at some point in the future.

As I think about the priorities being set and areas of emphasis in the discussions of these critical laws and CEC members' comments and concerns, it seems that the topic of collaboration between special educators and general educators should be front and center. Part of that emphasis on collaboration concerns co-teaching. Co-teaching seems to hold promise for providing meaningful access to the general curriculum for the vast majority of students with disabilities for whom this is appropriate, while ensuring that they can obtain their specialized instruction and other services.

The dilemma right now is that the research base on co-teaching is limited, and so there is a critical need to identify what high quality co-teaching is, and how to ensure it is implemented consistently. And, of course, the goal must be to determine the impact of co-teaching on student outcomes. I would add that many school professionals have data that demonstrate the power of co-teaching, but the data do not meet criteria to be considered research, nor are the educators who gather such data necessarily interested in publishing their results. What I hope is that, in the near future, studies of co-teaching will be supported to help all of us more clearly understand for which students it is most effective and the components that must be in place for it to reach its potential.

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